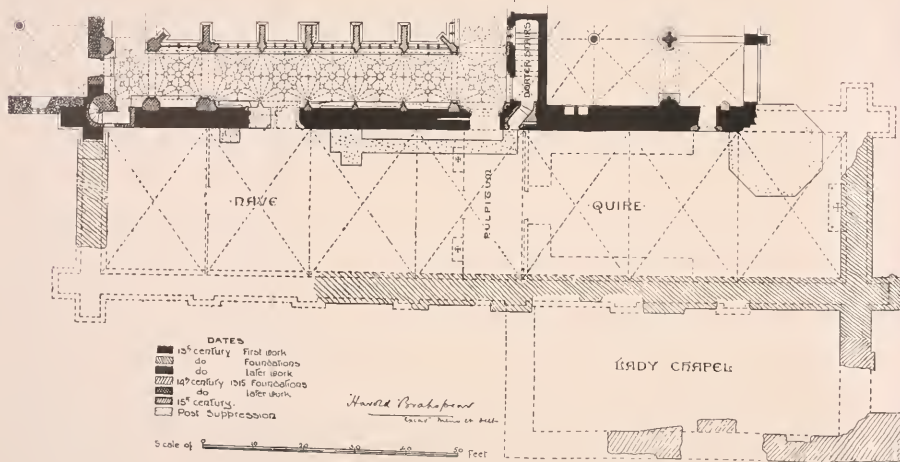




LACOCK ABBEY WILTS.

PLAN OF CHURCH.





LACOCK ABBEY CHURCH.

By HAROLD BRAKSPEAR, F.S.A.

The Abbey of Lacock was founded in 1232, by Ela, Countess of Salisbury, on a plot of ground called Snaylesmede, near Lacock—a small village on the banks of the River Avon, some five miles below Chippenham in Wiltshire. It was dedicated to the honour of St. Mary and St. Bernard, and occupied by Canonesses of the order of St. Augustine. At the Suppression in 1539, the site was sold to Sir William Sharington, Comptroller of the Mint at Bristol, who appears immediately to have commenced to convert the claustral buildings into a manor house.

The church, with which this paper treats, occupied the south side the cloisters and was entirely pulled down, except the six western bays of the north wall, which were retained to form the south wall of the house. Its extent and character were unknown, and could only be ascertained by excavation. In November, 1898, with the consent and co-operation of the owner, Mr. C. H. Talbot, I was enabled to make investigations on the site. Two men were employed, and the expenses defrayed by the Society of Antiquaries and the Local Society in equal shares. The destruction at various times had been so complete that the barest foundations were alone traceable, and in places even these were entirely grubbed up. But for all that the investigation has proved of considerable interest, and has enabled the length and width of the original church and the position of the added Lady-chapel to be determined.

The original church, which, judging from the style of the remaining part of the north wall, was commenced immediately after the foundation of the Monastery, was an aisleless parallelogram 143 feet long by 28 feet wide, without any structural division between the nave and quire. It was vaulted in seven bays resting on attached wall shafts, with moulded caps and bases supported on

corbels about 10 feet above the floor. The abacus of the corbels was continued along the walls as a string course, with a broad band of ashlar beneath.¹

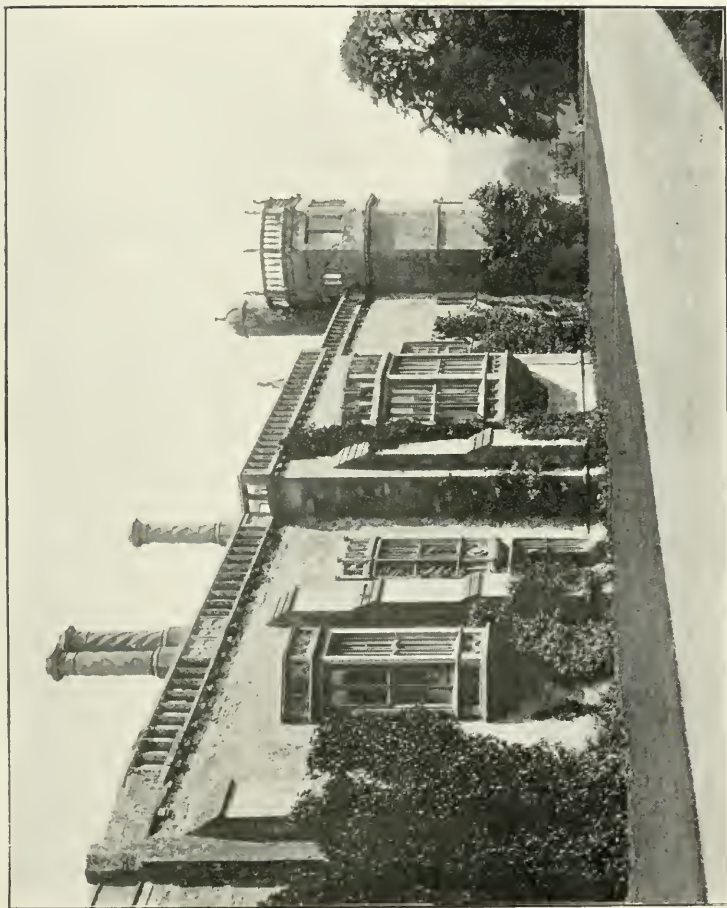
Each bay had a tall lancet window, with continuous jamb and arch moulding and a label over. The eastern range of the claustral buildings was contemporary with the church, and there are no windows in the two bays against which it abutted. Westward of this the church was built complete without any provision being made for the junction of the western range; which, although little later in date, is butted up against the north-west angle without any bond. The north buttress of this angle would have projected in an awkward manner into the southern apartment of the range, so the projecting part was cut away when the latter was built.

Externally, under the eaves was a continuous corbel table, and the bays were divided by flat pilaster buttresses stopped with a plain weathering just beneath the eaves. These buttresses next the cloister were cut away in line with the wall when the present cloister was built, but their positions are indicated by breaks in the plinth. The upper part of the fifth from the west remains perfect beneath the later roof of the Dorter. The plinth towards the cloister consists of two orders of chamfers, but at the west end is an additional order formed of a bold roll, hollowed beneath, just above the top chamfered course.

Judging from the foundations, the buttresses on the south side were precisely similar to those on the north. A peculiarity of these buttresses is that they are in nearly all cases out of centre with the vaulting behind, which would lead to the supposition that the idea of vaulting the church was not contemplated in the first place.

I am inclined to think that only the springers and wall ribs (the tails of which still remain in the walls) of the vault were in stone and the rest constructed in wood, as at Rochester, York, and other churches of this date, as the slight abutment afforded by the pilaster buttresses and walls, only 4 feet thick, would not be sufficient to

¹ All the projecting mouldings on this side the wall have been cut off in line with the wall face, probably by Sharrington at the Suppression.



VIEW FROM S.W., SHOWING REMAINING PART OF NORTH WALL OF CHURCH.



EASTERN PROCESSION DOORWAY.

retain the thrust of so wide a vault if in stone, and on the north side at any rate there is no evidence of failure.

Each corner of the church had bold double angle buttresses, each finished at the top with plain octagonal pinnacles, similar to those yet remaining at the south-west angle of Tintern Abbey Church. One of these buttresses remains complete at the north-west angle, and the pinnacle to some four courses above the original eaves. The buttress has two series of set-offs, the lower just above a string course that ran round the building under the side windows, and the upper about the level of the springer of the vaulting. The pinnacle was complete in 1732, and is shown in the view of that date by S. and N. Buck from the south-east. It had a plain spirelet top with a finial.

Part of the original west end is incorporated in a buttress, and the string course mentioned above jumps up some 18 inches before crossing the west front, probably to escape the head of the west entrance.

With respect to the original doorways, except those remaining in the north wall, it is difficult to speak; but probably there was a large doorway at the west end and a small one in the second bay on the south side, as at Lilleshall, Hexham, and other Canons' houses of the order. In the north wall, in the fourth bay from the west, is the eastern procession doorway to the cloisters, which also served till the fifteenth century as the night entrance from the dorter. It consists of two orders, the outer moulded and resting on nook shafts, with moulded caps and bases, and the inner hollow chamfered and continued down the jambs, with a label over. The rerearch is segmental and plainly chamfered. In the west jamb is the slot for the draw-bar, and the door was of two leaves. In the second bay from the west was the western procession doorway from the cloisters, which has been much altered, and one jamb entirely destroyed, but originally it was precisely similar to the eastern doorway. There was another original doorway in the sixth bay from the west, communicating with the southernmost apartment in the eastern range, which was in part used as the vestry. The face of this doorway next the church has been removed, and a four-centred moulded-

arched doorway of the fifteenth century inserted in its stead.

The first alteration to the original church was the addition of a large Lady-chapel on the south side the presbytery and quire in the beginning of the fourteenth century.

The remains of this chapel revealed by excavation were very scanty, and consisted of the footings of the east wall, in line with the east end of the church, and part of the south wall. At the south-east angle was a large mass of foundations, which may have been for a turret. The whole of the west wall, and part of the south wall, was entirely obliterated, so that it would be impossible to determine the length of the chapel, but for a very interesting document preserved at the Abbey. It is in the form of a building agreement written very clearly in Old French, and translated is as follows:—

“This is the covenant made between Lady Johanna de Mounfort Abbess of Lacoke and the convent of the same of the one part and Sir John Bluet Lord of Lacham of the other part. That is to say that the aforesaid Abbess and convent or their successors shall cause to be made and finished a chapel of Our Lady in their abbey of Lacoke, which chapel shall adjoin their high church of the same abbey. And thus shall the chapel be, in length fifty and nine feet, and in width twenty five and a half and there shall be in the said chapel four windows that is to say in each gable one window as large as the one is made and finished and the other as it is begun shall be well made and finished, and in the far (south) side of the aforesaid chapel the one to be such as is made and finished and the other as large as it is begun shall be made and finished of good and suitable work and the aforesaid windows shall be suitably ironed and glazed. And the old wall shall be taken down from the apex of the two windows which were and appeared on the making of this writing in the wall aforesaid as far as the string course next below the sills of the same windows, and two arches shall be made there where the wall shall be taken down as large that is to say as can well and surely be suffered between the two buttresses so that the old arch (window arch) can be sawn without peril. And

the aforesaid Abbess and convent or their successors shall cause to be made the roof of the same chapel of good timber and suitable work and a roof of such kind as shall please the aforesaid Abbess and convent or their successors. And the aforesaid chapel that is to say the roof, shall be well and suitably covered with lead, and the roof within the aforesaid chapel shall be all well ceiled and painted. . . .” The rest of the agreement deals with the times the work shall take to finish and tells us no more about the building. The date of the agreement is 1315.¹

It will be seen that the document is full of interest and gives a great deal of information respecting the arrangement of the chapel. In the first place the manner of building this addition formed no exception to the mediæval plan of almost completing new work before any alteration was made to the original building, as when the writing was made, certain of the new windows were finished and others were begun, and no arches had then been made in the old walls.

These arches of connection with the church were to be as large as safety would allow, and were only continued down to the string course below the sills of the old windows and not to the ground, on account of the quire stalls occupying the blank wall under the windows of those bays interfered with. The same arrangement of arches still remains across the transepts of the Canons' church of Newark in Surrey, but in that case the arches were not insertions, but part of the original design. As there were only two arches to be inserted, the eastern bay of the presbytery must have been left unaltered, probably on account of the sedilia, lockers, etc., being in that wall in connection with the High Altar.

Each gable was pierced by a window, and the south wall had two windows. The monument of Sir John Bluet, who was buried in this chapel, and around which four candles were maintained daily,² was probably provided for from the first and occupied the centre of the wall between the windows; a large block of foundation was found projecting inside the wall face, which probably

¹ *Wilts Archaeological Magazine*, Vol. XVI, p. 350.

² *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, Vol. II, p. 15.

formed the support to this. In unblocking the east procession doorway, we found some small but very beautifully carved fragments, which may have formed part of the monument, the style of the fragments agreeing with the date of this work. The roof was to be a wooden one "all well ceiled and painted."

Another alteration of the fourteenth century, but much later than the Lady-chapel, was the insertion of the vice, or spiral staircase, in the north-west turret, with an entrance at the bottom into the church and cloister. This was inserted to obtain direct communication to the church from apartments now occupied by the present dining-room, which may safely be ascribed to the use of the Abbess. At the same time the two west bays of the south alley of the cloisters were built, with a small chapel over, which blocked up the first window of the church from the west.

There is no evidence remaining of any further alteration to the church till the fifteenth century, when the rest of the present cloister was built. It was commenced next the two bays last mentioned and continued eastward. There was a low second story over, against the church wall, and when this was built the rest of the church windows next the cloisters were built up and the pilaster buttresses, labels, and string courses chopped off to the wall face.

The new spacing of the cloisters into bays caused one of the vaulting piers to come in the centre of the western procession doorway, and as these piers project a considerable distance from the wall, the difficulty could not so easily be overcome as in the case of the vestry doorway, over which the vaulting was brought down in a pendant. Unfortunately the door has been much cut about and altered by later work, so very little of the fifteenth century alteration is discernible, but there seems to have been a buttress-like pillar carried up in front of each original jamb, high enough to escape the clear of the arch and covered by a flat lintel, from which the vaulting springs abruptly. The top horizontal line of this lintel shows on the ribs of the vault, from which point in later time they have been cut down and a wall pier inserted under, *to match the rest*.

Another alteration of this date was cutting a skew passage into the church from the lobby at the foot of the dorter stairs. The reason of this being formed through the wall at an angle was so as not to interfere with the support of the vaulting shaft, which it now escapes. The passage has a square-headed doorway into the church, with the door opening therefrom. In the east jamb is the slot hole for the draw-bolt, which retains the original wood lining for the bolt to slide in. This opening has now been built up solid, to check a serious settlement which had occurred at this point. At the same time these alterations were made on the north side the church, five very curious upright stone shoots, in the shape of down pipes, were fixed to the upper part of the wall, to carry off the water from the roof. All have been since removed, except one, which fortunately remains perfect.

There was a part of the Abbey Church the position and character of which is still unsettled, and that is the belfry, which must have existed, as we have the following notices of the bells it contained :—

“Abbey of Lacock—(D) Church, mansion and all oder houses in very good astate. The lead and *bells* there esteemed to be sold to £100 10s. 0*d*.¹

“Here were a good ring of bells, which Sir (Wm.) Sharrington sold when he built Rea-bridge to divert the travelling by his house. The ringers took their leave of the bells of the Abbey when they were taken down, which was on the 1st of May A.D. (1540). This country Rhythme was made upon it,

““On Phillip and Jacob (Sts. Phillip and James day May 1st) the bells rung at Lacock.

The great bell went with such a surge, that he fell in at Rea-burge.’

This rhytheme, bad as it be, was used in evidence at Sarum Assizes, at the trial for pulling down Rea-bridge, which was about 165—.”²

This is all we know about a belfry, but as there is no structural evidence of its existence in the original church, it is natural to suppose it was an addition, also as there

¹ P.R.O. Chantry Certificates, No. 100, m. 2, *Wills Archaeological Magazine*, Vol. XXVIII, p. 309.

² Jackson's *Aubrey*, p. 90.

was "a good ring of bells" it is hardly likely to have been a wooden structure on the roof or elsewhere. If it was a detached campanile, as at Salisbury, it may have been at some distance from the church, but if it was connected with the church, it must have been on the south side at the west end, and all the foundations at this point were grubbed up. So that until more documentary evidence is forthcoming any suggestion as to its character or position is mere supposition.

With respect to the internal arrangements, through the utter destruction of everything above the ground level except the north wall, all the evidences are centred in this. Just to the right of the third vaulting shaft from the east was a large hole in the wall about 11 feet from the ground, which has been roughly patched up with stones and tiles. This marks the end of the beam over the quire screen, which must have been of wood, and from this point to the small door into the sacristy were the Canonesses' stalls. Allowing the usual space for each stall, there would be nine seats against each wall and three on each side the quire entry facing east, which would make in all twenty-four seats.

In the centre of the quire stood the tomb of the foundress Ela, who was "in choro decentissime tumulata,"¹ around which were lighted twenty-five candles daily throughout the year.² Part of this monument is now placed in the south alley of the cloister, and consists of a Purbeck marble slab bearing the housing for a brass of the fourteenth century, and round the edge was the following inscription in Lombardic characters :—

"INFRA SVNT DEFOSSA ELE VENERABILIS OSSA
QUÆ DEDIT HAS SEDES SACRAS MONIALIBVS ÆDES
ABBATISSA QVIDEM QVÆ SANCTE VIXIT IBIDEM
ET COMITISSA SARVM VIRTVTVM PLENA BONARVM."³

Unfortunately, owing to the dampness of its position it has suffered by the action of frost, and partly obliterated the inscription.

Opposite the small doorway into the vestry would

¹ *Liber de Lacock*. Vide Bowles and Nicholls's *History of Lacock*, Appendix, p. 5.

² *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, Vol. II, p. 15.

³ Bowles and Nicholls's *History of Lacock*, p. 5.

be another door to the Lady-chapel. Immediately east of these doors would be three steps across the presbytery, known as the *gradus presbyterii*, where during Lent usually hung the veil. As this only allows 20 feet for the presbytery proper, which is very short, the High Altar would stand close against the east wall and not detached therefrom as was usually the case.

Immediately westwards of the quire screen the arrangement is not obvious, but judging from other oblong aisleless churches there would be a second screen with a central doorway parallel to the quire screen just westward of the procession doorway. These two screens would support a loft or gallery known as the *pulpitum*, from whence the gospel and epistle were sung on holy days. At one end was usually placed the organs. There would be two small altars against the west side of the western screen.

The western procession doorway is not in its normal position, which was opposite the west wall of the cloisters, so placed that processions passing round the cloister could enter direct into the church to take up their station before the rood.

As the west wall of the church at Lacock is in line with the east wall of the western range, the normal place had to be abandoned, or otherwise there would have been no space westward where strangers, who would not be admitted to the eastern parts of the church, could witness divine service. This space was apparently partitioned off from the rest of the church by a screen just eastward of the first vaulting shaft from the west, and is shown by the quoins of the vaulting shaft being cut off in a straight perpendicular line to receive the end of the screen.